

**Amendment to the Claims:**

This listing of claims will replace all prior versions, and listings, of claims in the application:

**Listing of Claims:**

Claim 1 (currently amended): A method for defining hardware routing paths in a network having IP paths and MPLS paths, the method comprising:

assigning a unique path ID for each path within a path group, the path ID for each path comprising an IP address, wherein the path group contains ~~IP paths, MPLS paths, or both IP and MPLS paths;~~

comparing all path IDs in each path group; and

assigning a common hardware resource to groups having matching path IDs.

Claim 2 (original): The method of claim 1 wherein assigning a path ID for each IP path comprises assigning a unicast IP address.

Claim 3 (original): The method of claim 2 wherein the unicast IP address corresponds to the IP path's next hop IP address.

Claim 4 (original): The method of claim 2 wherein assigning a path ID for each MPLS path comprises assigning a unique IP multicast address.

Claim 5 (original): The method of claim 4 wherein assigning a unique IP multicast address comprises assigning a unique IP address from an internal managed group of IDs.

Claim 6 (original): The method of claim 5 wherein the internal managed group of IDs is sufficiently large to represent all network hardware paths.

Claim 7 (original): The method of claim 5 wherein assigning a unique IP address comprises assigning a unique IP address for each software MPLS path entity.

Claim 8 (original): The method of claim 7 further comprising returning an assigned unique IP address to the group of internal managed IDs when a path entity is deleted.

Claim 9 (original): The method of claim 1 further comprising sorting the paths in each of the path groups.

Claim 10 (original): The method of claim 9 wherein sorting the paths comprises sorting the paths by the value of the path ID.

Claim 11 (original): The method of claim 1 further comprising building a database containing all path groups and using the database to compare the group paths.

Claim 12 (currently amended): A system for defining hardware routing paths in a network having IP paths and MPLS paths, the system comprising:

a processor operable to assign a unique path ID for each path within a path group, the path ID for each path comprising an IP address, compare all path IDs in each path group, and assign a common hardware resource to groups having matching path IDs, wherein the path group contains ~~IP paths, MPLS paths, or both IP and MPLS~~ paths; and

memory for storing the path IDs.

Claim 13 (original): The system of claim 12 wherein the path IDs assigned for IP paths comprise unicast IP addresses.

Claim 14 (original): The system of claim 12 wherein the path IDs assigned for MPLS paths comprise unique IP multicast addresses.

Claim 15 (original): The system of claim 12 wherein the path IDs assigned for MPLS paths comprise broadcast IP addresses of form 255.x.x.x.

Claim 16 (original): The system of claim 12 further comprising a database of multicast IP addresses sufficiently large to represent all network hardware paths.

Claim 17 (currently amended): A computer program product for defining hardware routing paths in a network having IP paths and MPLS paths, the product comprising:

code that assigns a unique path ID for each path within a path group, the path ID for each path comprising an IP address, wherein the path group contains ~~all IP paths, all MPLS paths or both IP and MPLS paths;~~

code that compares all path IDs in each path group;

code that assigns a common hardware resource to groups having matching path IDs; and

a computer-readable storage medium for storing the codes and the path IDs.

Claim 18 (currently amended): The method of claim 1 further comprising programming ~~hardware route entries~~ in a route table and adjacency table ~~entries~~ to define hardware resources.

Claim 19 (canceled).

Claim 20 (previously presented): The method of claim 1 wherein said path group comprises paths having corresponding source routers and destination routers.